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Committee on Conferences
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Draft report

Addendum

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II. Calendar of conferences and meetings

B. Improved utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities

4. Improved coordination and utilization of conference services

Introduction and overview

1. At its 437th meeting, on 27 August 2001, the Committee considered an oral report by the Chief of the Central Planning and Coordination Service, Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services of the United Nations Secretariat, on the improved coordination and utilization of conference services.

2. The second Secretariat-wide coordination meeting of conference services managers, held on 2 and 3 July 2001 in Geneva, had been attended by representatives of the four duty stations and the regional commissions, with the exception of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. The International Court of Justice had also participated as an observer. Discussions had centred on nine major areas of conference servicing:

(a) Assignment of responsibility for servicing meetings away from established headquarters;

(b) Lateral transfers of language staff;

(c) Coordination of technical advances;

(d) Development of performance measurement mechanisms;

(e) Drafting of operating guidelines;

(f) Financial reports;

(g) Improved coordination in the area of contractual translation;

(h) Common examination for written language functions;

(i) Language issues related to the United Nations web site.

3. With regard to meetings away from established headquarters, the responsibility for conference services coordination was assigned to the headquarters location of the substantive secretariat, pursuant to the agreement reflected in the relevant paragraph of the administrative instruction on the guidelines for the preparation of host government agreements falling under General Assembly resolution 40/243; that paragraph had been issued as administrative instruction ST/AI/2001/6. In 2002, services would be provided to six sessions being held away from established headquarters. Discussions had centred on broad policy aspects, such as coordinating clearance procedures for the headquarters agreements, establishing teams composed of staff from all locations, financial arrangements and inclusion of smaller duty stations. Trials of coordinated workload-sharing pointed to potential efficiency gains; for example, in 2001 a Vienna-based body meeting in New York had been provided with all of its in-session documentation via remote processing based in Vienna, which had reduced a potential bottleneck of documentation in New York.

4. With regard to the lateral transfers of language staff, the new human resources management system approved by the Fifth Committee in June 2001 would first be applied within the Department at the four duty stations and then gradually extended to other duty stations.

5. Enhanced coordination of technological advances was necessary in order to avoid duplication of development efforts and to make the most efficient use of limited resources. A working group had been set up to formulate the projects and elements of an information technology strategy project for the Department. The established practice of designating a lead duty station as the focal point for information-sharing and coordination had been reiterated and elaborated upon to ensure the role to be played by smaller duty stations.

6. Senior managers of the Department had been reminded of the importance and urgency of the development of performance measurement mechanisms and the drafting of operating guidelines. Smaller groupings of managers had exchanged ideas and experience.

7. A smaller working group had been established to develop guidelines for the preparation of financial reports and to analyse existing procedures for their clearance prior to submission to other units of the Secretariat.

8. Discussions on improved coordination in the area of contractual translation had focused on applying existing policies in order to achieve resource harmonization among duty stations and to share rosters of contractual translators.

9. Following presentations on the experiences gained in the common examination for written language functions, the Executive Office at Headquarters would prepare an analysis for presentation to the Office of Human Resources Management. That was especially necessary in order to further address the lack of functional mobility of language staff, to move staff to meet peak workload periods and to improve career prospects.

10. Lastly, the use of official languages on the United Nations web site was a sensitive issue, involving the equal treatment of all of them. The principle must be respected and efforts should be made to increase the content in all languages. While the Department's output on the web was available in all six languages, it would be affected by eventual decisions in that area, especially in terms of resources.

Discussion

11. Replying to questions concerning the common examination for written language functions, the Director of the Translation and Editorial Division said that expectations of its leading to improved career prospects and better utilization of language staff had not materialized. The common examination had attracted fewer candidates than the specialized examinations because the function of verbatim reporter essentially did not exist outside the United Nations. In addition, candidates who possessed the requisite skills to pass the translation portion of the examination had been unwilling to accept posts as verbatim reporters. Moreover, because peak periods tended to occur in all sections simultaneously, it had proved impractical to rotate staff among different language functions. Nevertheless, in order to take advantage of economies of scale it had been decided to hold a common examination over three days, leading to three separate rosters of translators, editors and verbatim reporters.

12. With regard to the assignment of responsibility for servicing meetings away from established headquarters, it was noted that net budgeting in 1998-1999 had improved the situation with regard to workload-sharing. It was to be hoped that there would be up-front reimbursement to duty stations suffering from resource constraints.

13. The view was expressed that the Committee should adopt the relevant recommendations contained in the report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) (A/56/7), such as utilization at one duty station of unutilized capacity at another duty station. In that connection, attention was drawn to a statement in the ACABQ report indicating that resources which the Department had confirmed were available might not be available.

Conclusions and recommendations

14. **The Committee on Conferences took note with appreciation of the oral report by the Secretariat on improved coordination of conference services.**

15. **The Committee welcomed the efforts and results of the Secretariat to coordinate conference services globally in accordance with the revised administrative instruction (ST/AI/2001/6), and encouraged further steps in that area.**

16. **The Committee requested that it be kept informed of the workload statistics at the various duty stations.**